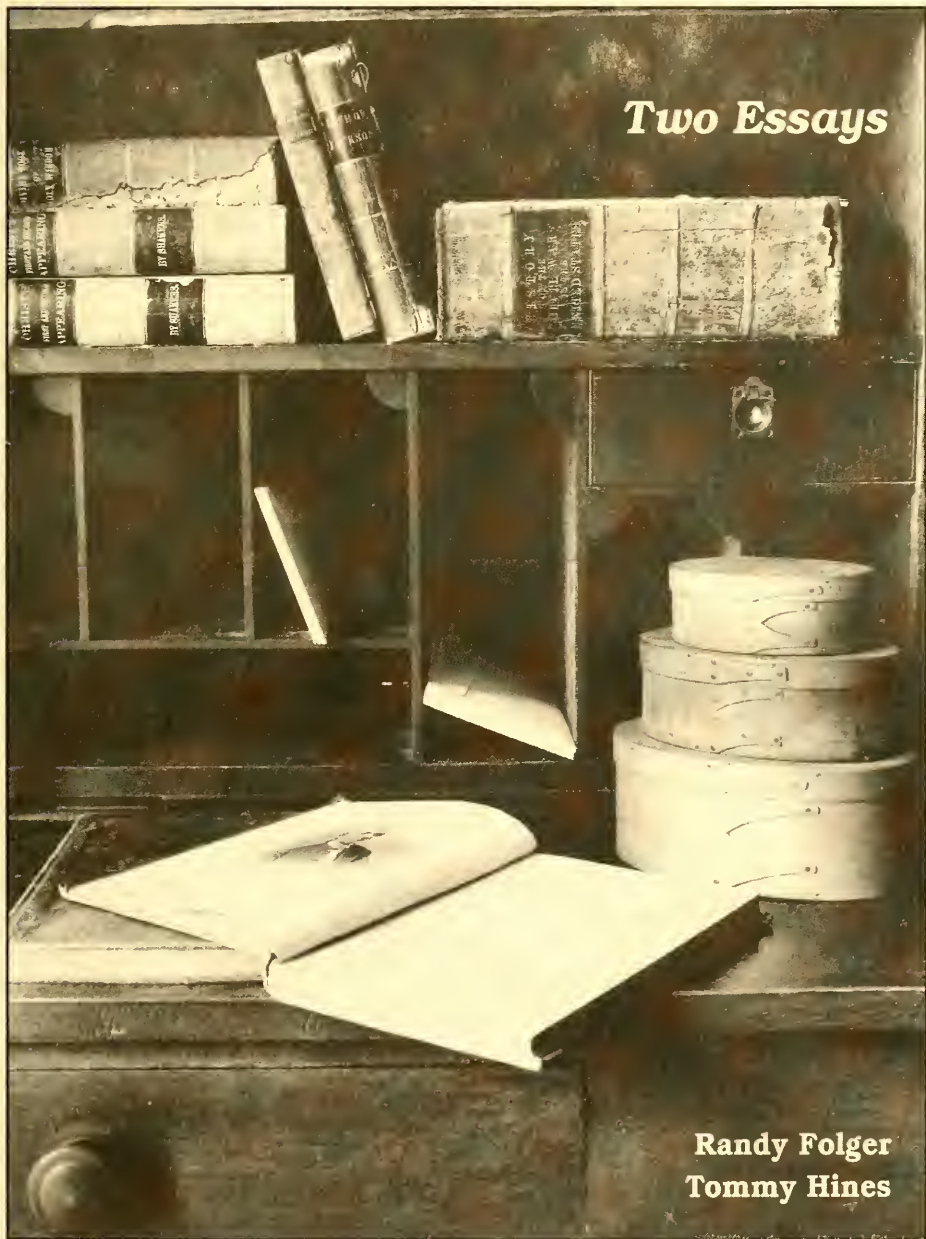


# IN THE SPIRIT OF SHAKER



*Two Essays*



Randy Folger  
Tommy Hines

**John C. Campbell Folk School  
of Brasstown, NC**

with

**The North Carolina  
Humanities Council**

*Makes You Kindly Welcome*

**IN THE SPIRIT  
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with

**Randy Folger**

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Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, Kentucky

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Executive Director

Shaker Museum at South Union, Kentucky

**November 9 – November 15, 1997**

Cover Photograph: Shaker Museum at South Union, Kentucky

# South Union Shaker Furniture: *A View From the Outer Branch of the Vineyard*

Tommy Hines

The Shakers who lived at South Union, Kentucky, always saw themselves as somewhat isolated from their fellow Believers. When the communal religious sect, called the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, sent missionaries from their outposts in the northeastern United States, they sought locations for their "western" villages in regions affected by the great religious revivals that were taking place. Between 1805 and 1822, seven communities were founded in Indiana, Ohio, and Kentucky, the most southern of which was called South Union. South Union was also the most physically separated from the others, being situated over 150 miles from its closest Shaker neighbor, Pleasant Hill. The four day trip between the two villages was considered "both tedious and expensive." (1) The New York natives who were assigned to lead the community at South Union thought they had come to the end of the earth.

From the beginning South Union struggled to survive. The site the Shakers chose in southern Kentucky was located in a part of the state known as the Barrens, a landscape resembling the great plains, with "little or no vegetation... [and where] scrubby bushes served for timber."

(2) The Shakers purchased a tract of timber near their settlement in 1811 and began to build log cabins to house a growing community. Initially, South Union's cluster of log structures, surrounded by gardens and out-buildings, looked no different than other rural settlements in southern Kentucky.

What set South Union apart visually from the rest of their region began to take place over the next twenty years. By the early 1830s over fifty brick structures towered above the flat landscape. Massive dwellings that each housed nearly one hundred people, a vast mill complex and large brick workshops that rivaled any other such establishments in the state, well-groomed orchards and gar-





dens, agricultural-based industries that were models of economy and efficiency, characterized what Mt. Lebanon, New York, Elder Giles Avery called "...an oasis in this desert of a country." (3)

Although South Union held tightly to the ideological precepts of Shaker religion and philosophy, the community relied heavily on its region, both economically and culturally. Because South Union was considered "the outer branch of the vineyard" (4) in the network of Shaker villages and because the early converts were steeped in the traditions of their parents who had come to Kentucky from across the nation's "back country" region, a distinctly southern Shaker community developed. South Union's look and feel were the result of the attitudes, customs, and beliefs brought into the village by those seeking membership. The combination of this strong sense of tradition with the intensity of the Shakers' quest for Godly perfection, simplicity, and order, produced an atmosphere and a mind-set that, in turn, created a unique material culture.

One of the most fascinating aspects of South Union's material culture is its furniture. An inventory of extant examples reveals a cohesive collection in which specific molding profiles, turnings, and other decorative elements, as well as basic construction techniques, recur again and again. There was most likely one craftsman who supervised the production of community furniture during its years of prolificacy, 1815-1860. South Union member Robert Johns (1795-1863), was most probably the man whose influence led to the consistency of form and design evident in the community's material culture. Listed time and again as South Union's principle carpenter, Johns was also foreman during the construction of South Union's Centre Family Dwelling (1822-1833). Shaker furniture scholar Jean Burks was the first to note the direct correlation between South Union's architecture and its free-standing furniture. "Details in the interior woodwork and trim of the.. Centre Family Dwelling.. are literally repeated in the moveable furnishings within," writes Burks. (5) This phenomenon is not found in any of the other western Shaker villages to the degree that it is at South Union.

Manuscript records reveal that South Union craftsmen were making furniture for sale as early as 1815. Between January and June of that year the Shakers sold the following:

2 walnut tables @ \$14 each  
1 cupboard @ \$15  
1 bedstead @ \$1.25  
2 circular cherry tables @ \$15 each  
1 Buroe @ \$16 (6)

While never a major source of income for the South Union Shakers, furniture sales to "the world" continued through the early 1820s. After that, craftsmen concentrated on supplying the village. By the mid-1820s South Union was approaching its peak in population and beginning an aggressive building construction program that would only accelerate the community's need for furniture. Native hardwoods, walnut and cherry, were the materials of choice. Following a regional practice, South Union craftsmen chose poplar as the secondary wood on most pieces. Poplar was also selected as the principle material for the interior woodwork and free-standing furniture that were to be painted.

One of the most obvious characteristics of South Union furniture is the presence of decorative detail. The Shakers' Millennial Laws mandated in the 1845 revision that "beadings, moul-

dings and cornices which are merely for fancy may not be made by Believers," a written decree of the sect's longstanding philosophy on the importance of simplicity in all things. (7) Beauty itself was supposed to be a by-product of simplicity, order and function, not something derived merely from useless decoration. It is apparent that simplicity was defined differently in Kentucky than it was in Mt. Lebanon, New York, the home of the Shakers' policy-making lead ministry. Upon examination of the South Union collection today one finds an abundance of subtle ornamental detail such as beadings and scribe lines that quietly "finish" the edges of cupboard doors or the pedestals of tripod stands. Moldings were commonly applied to architectural woodwork, built-in cupboards and free-standing furniture. At least eight different molding profiles have been documented.

During the decade just prior to the Civil War, craftsmen at South Union began to produce furniture that characterized their most blatant use of ornamentation. Extant tables and beds from this period have elaborately turned legs that culminate in simple pear-shaped feet. Relating closely to vernacular prototypes, these tables and beds are definitely not typical of Shaker design, in either eastern or western communities. Interestingly, there are also tables in the South Union collection with simple, cylindrically-turned legs, produced during this same period. Why two distinctively different styles were being created at the same time within the same shop is unknown.

Because South Union furniture is so closely related to the southern Kentucky and northern Tennessee region, it is sometimes difficult to determine if a piece is of Shaker or "worldly" origin. South Union candlestands, for example, can be nearly identical to those that were made outside the village. South Union bureaus, while usually communal in scale, bear a striking resemblance to regional vernacular examples. Chairs are also similar to those made by non-Shakers in the area. Fortunately, each of these forms exhibit not only shared design characteristics but shared provenance as well. Candlestands attributed to South Union reveal uniformity in pedestal turnings, two styles of turned feet predominate on community bureaus and three distinctive finials have been documented on South Union chairs. While subtle variation abounds, village prototypes must have been created to establish parameters.

There are several southern forms of furniture that the South Union Shakers adopted for use in their village when other Shaker villages did not. One of the most unusual is the slab or hunt board. Early nineteenth century inventories of some of the region's more prominent homes listed slabs, usually with the family's dining room furnishings. (8) As is typical in vernacular examples, the South Union slab has a long, narrow working surface over two large, deep drawers supported by four tall, cylindrical legs.

Upon initial inspection this piece would be almost impossible to detect as Shaker. However, besides being purchased by a local family at the 1922 village auction, the slab also possesses one of the two standard leg turnings found on South Union tables: a simple, cylindrically-turned leg decorated with ring-turnings near the top and ball-turnings near the base. The transition that takes place just below the bottom level of the drawer, where square post changes to round leg, is softened with a "lamb's tongue" feature. This transition is consistently found on all extant South Union tables with cylindrical legs, as well as on architectural posts throughout the site's 1824 Center Family Dwelling.

Another regional form found at South Union but attributed to no other Shaker village is the safe, or "pie safe," as it has become known. Shaker craftsmen created a twenty-four tin,

walnut safe that stood more than seven feet in height on slender, tapered legs. The South Union safe, originally painted red, accented with blue tins, typifies the cabinet-making techniques that were being used in the community by the early 1830s. This striking example of South Union craftsmanship appeared in the *Magazine Antiques* in 1947 when still owned by Oscar Bond, who found it in one of the abandoned South Union buildings after he took possession of the village in 1922. He eventually donated the safe to the Shaker Museum at South Union, where it holds the distinction of being one of only three pieces never to have left the historic site.

An example of a common form adapted to fit a specific need is the unique South Union linen press. While most antebellum linen presses consist of a cupboard over a bank of drawers, South Union craftsmen devised a prototype where the cupboard top or press rested upon a short, one-drawer table. Since all the known examples of this form stand less than 60 inches in height, one might surmise that the linen presses were made low to the ground at the request of the sisters who were concerned about easy accessibility. Only five of these presses are known to exist and each of them are detailed with typical South Union moldings, beadings, and leg turnings. The South Union linen press appears to be unique in Shaker material culture, although a similar short table base attributed to Pleasant Hill has recently been discovered.

Another unusual form found only at South Union is the community's interpretation of the sewing desk. A variety of tables and desks created for the purpose of sewing and mending were used in most Shaker villages, the prototypes for which were primarily derived from worldly examples. The diminutive South Union sewing desks were adaptations of the Federal worktable that also incorporated shaped tops, splayed legs, and a drawer mounted on the underside of the work surface. (9) Three mid-nineteenth century variations of this form survived at South Union, the most interesting of which features a drawer that pulls up from the work surface to expose stored needles, thread and hand tools. Unlike some eastern Shaker examples, the South Union desks were built for use by only one person at a time. The combination of design characteristics and decorative detail makes these sewing desks purely South Union.

A true meeting of eastern and western Shaker craftsmanship is exemplified in South Union's dwarf case clock. The timepiece itself was made in 1812 by Benjamin Youngs, Sr. (1736-1818) at the Shaker community in Watervliet, New York. Youngs gave the clock to his nephew, Benjamin Seth Youngs (1774-1855), to take to South Union where he had assumed the leadership position of Elder. Once in Kentucky, a case, less than sixty inches in height, was made to house the intricate brass works. The dwarf case form was certainly not unique to South Union, but the one designed by South Union craftsman William Knowles in 1835 bore no resemblance to those that had been made for Youngs' clocks in the east. Made of cherry and poplar, Knowles' case included a columned bonnet crowned with a graceful cove molding, three glazed openings that exposed the clock's face and its large brass pendulum, and maple cock-beading that decoratively defined the clock's two hinged doors. The interior of the case retains original paint that matches the color scheme used by the Shakers on the interior woodwork of the 1824 Center Dwelling, yellow ochre and brick red.

The South Union dwarf clock is the perfect example of the incorporation of regional taste by a Shaker craftsman, even when an eastern prototype had been established. Benjamin Seth Youngs was not only familiar with the simple cabinetmaking treatment of most of his uncle's clocks in New York, but was probably aware that the South Union case was much more decora-



tive than Mt. Lebanon would have approved. Benjamin Seth Youngs was evidently more concerned with providing spiritual and temporal leadership for his growing community than re-training its craftsmen.

The living and work spaces inhabited by the Shakers were probably never furnished with only things made by Shaker hands. It is more likely that Shaker rooms were filled with a healthy mixture of furniture brought into the village by converts, furniture purchased by the community and, of course, furniture made by the Shakers. Interior spaces did not remain static. Many of the communities were active for over a hundred years, changing with the times, whether subconsciously mirroring their neighbors or consciously up-dating to attract converts. The Shaker community at Sabbathday Lake, Maine, the strong but singular beacon of Shakerism today, progresses with the times while continuing the tradition of religious conviction after more than two hundred years.

The Shakers at South Union were purchasing chairs by the 1840s for use in their communal dining rooms; a practical, frugal solution to a need that, for some reason, could not be met within the village. They also ordered furniture for the 1841 Trustees' Office, a building where business was conducted and overnight lodging and meals were available. Records show that the same was true in 1869 when the Shakers, hoping to capitalize on the L & N Railroad's new route through the village, hired a local contractor to build a hotel near the tracks. The Shaker Tavern was outfitted with furniture selected to suit the tastes of its Victorian customers.

After the Civil War little was recorded about furniture production at South Union. The devastating financial effect of the war thrust the Shakers back into a mode of survival that they had experienced fifty years before. As fewer and fewer dedicated converts joined the community, the need for new furniture vanished. A notable exception is the desk of Elder Harvey Eads. Eads joined the Shakers at the age of two when his family became one of the first to convert at South Union in 1807. He grew up in the Shaker faith, eventually becoming an Elder and the author of a number of publications on Shakerism. Eads' notoriety and status within the community may have brought about the construction of a walnut desk specifically for his use. Dating between 1865 and 1890, the desk is an odd combination of historic South Union decorative details and blatant Victorian ornamentation. Besides porcelain pulls, sliding glass doors, a bentwood canopy to cover the writing surface, and a retractable wooden plate on which a lamp could be placed, the maker also applied small wooden fans as corner decoration. Furniture influenced by Victorian taste was made in many of the Shaker villages that were still active during the period, but this singular example from South Union marks the end of production in that community.

By the early 1920s the nine Shakers who remained at South Union made the decision to begin selling furniture that they were no longer using. The first of three auctions was recorded with little fanfare in the community journal:

"Sold old furniture today... at the church door to the highest bidder.. Several pieces brought over \$100.00 each. All went high. Beyond our expectations. One old corded bedstead brought \$35.00. Candlesticks were in demand but none could be found. Return not given. The guess was between \$3,000.00 and \$4,000.00. (Whatever it is - I think is better than leaving the furniture for the rats to destroy in the attic.)" (10)

Another sale, held in April of 1922, was billed as the "Last Call for Antique Furniture at Shakertown, Ky." A broadside published for the event listed, "chests of drawers, tables, large

and small, twin beds, wardrobes, cupboards, straightback chairs,” as some of the items to be sold, adding that they had been “made by the old time Shakers from solid walnut, cherry, and oak.” (11) The presence of oak furniture in the community at the time of the sale is evidence that “worldly” furniture was being used in conjunction with that made by the Shakers.

By the time the “Last Call” auction was held, the Shakers at South Union were gone. The ministry at Mt. Lebanon, New York, had made the decision to close the village earlier in the year, giving each of the remaining nine Shakers a choice of passage to New York or a \$10,000.00 check to begin life outside the security of a Shaker village. All but two chose the world.

A sad end to a once thriving community, South Union’s auctions in the early 1920s have been one of the most valuable resources of documentation and provenance for the Museum collection today. Over eighty percent of the collection can be traced directly to one of the Shaker sales. When that information is coupled with recurring design characteristics, historic photographs, and manuscript records, South Union’s material culture puzzle begins to make sense. Looked upon for many years as second best or ignored altogether in the study of Shaker material culture, furniture made by the South Union Shakers is now being recognized for what it is, a southern Kentuckian’s interpretation of the rules. It may not fit the mold of eastern Shakerdom’s classic period, but the “outer branch’s” offering to Godly perfection celebrates the diversity of America’s longest lived communal experiment.

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## Footnotes

- 1) A Letter from John Meacham, Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, to Mother Lucy Wright, New Lebanon, New York, August 21, 1810, Collection of Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio
- 2) “A Pilgrimage to the Shrine of Celibacy...,” *Franklin Favorite*, Franklin, Kentucky, June 6, 1886
- 3) A Traveller’s Account by Elder Giles Avery, New Lebanon, New York, on a visit to South Union, June 25, 1862, Collection of Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio
- 4) A Letter from Ministry, South Union, Kentucky, to Ministry, New Lebanon, New York, January 15, 1867, Collection of Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio
- 5) A Letter from Jean Burks, Shelburne, Vermont, to Tommy Hines, South Union, Kentucky, March 1, 1996
- 6) An Account Book, South Union, Kentucky, 1815, Collection of Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio
- 7) Millennial Laws, 1845 Revision, quoted from *The People Called Shakers*; Edward Deming Andrews, Dover Publications, Inc. New York, 1963
- 8) *The Art and Mystery of Tennessee Furniture Makers*
- 9) “Worktables of Early America: A Tale of Form and Function,” by Joseph D. Watson, *Southern Accents*, July-August 1990, pp.30-39
- 10) A Diary Kept by the Church Center Family, South Union, Kentucky, 1900-1922, Collection of the Shaker Museum, Old Chatham, New York
- 11) “Last Call” Broadside, April 8, 1922, Collection of the Shaker Museum at South Union, Kentucky



# An Overview Of Shaker Music And Worship

Randy Folger

Music was of the utmost importance to a group that believed in dancing in worship and since the more than 20,000 songs were written by a large cross-section of the Believers, much can be learned about the Shakers from the tunes and lyrics. Music was one of their only legal means of artistic expression and many of the Shaker songs are achingly beautiful. Many have a haunting, almost otherworldly quality to them.

The music in church was always done *a cappella* (without instruments) from the early beginnings until the latter 1800s, because the Shakers did not think one could improve upon the most perfect instrument, God's instrument—the voice—with anything artificial or man-made. Instruments were used in the village but only for “innocent recreation.” There was one instrument allowed in church that was invented by the Shakers; it was called the “tonometer” and was a stringed instrument used only to find the beginning pitch of a song.

Harmony was not allowed in Shaker music until 1842. Before that they believed that if all sang in unison, greater unity was promoted. They were thinking and singing the same things. In 1842, a sister passed out in a service and entered a trance. When she awoke she told the gathered that she had had a wonderful vision and in the vision she heard the angels singing in harmony. The ministers said it was a sign from God that they could begin singing with harmony.



Singing meetings were held usually on weekdays but also sometimes on Sunday mornings before the Sabbath service to perfect the singing of the anthem designated for the later service held in the village meeting house. The first Shaker songs were wordless tunes which were hummed, usually as accompaniment to the early dances. It was not until the late 1800s that the use of musical instruments was acceptable, so voice was the only possible accompaniment to early dance exercises. Shaker songs remained wordless until the field of religious music as a whole was influenced by "The Great Awakening" in New England and by the Great or Kentucky Revival in the west.

Up to the time of the Kentucky Revival, the limited number of shaker tunes could be learned by rote or 'hearing.' But to remember the longer 'noted' and 'worded' songs and sing them correctly, some knowledge of music was required. In (Isaac) Youngs' words, the reading of music, 'gradually introduced about 1807', was made necessary because of the labor involved in 'retaining' and 'conveying' an increasing repertoire of hymns.

(Andrews, The Gift to be Simple p.13)

A western Shaker, Richard McNemar, formerly a Presbyterian preacher who had been a leader of the Kentucky revival and is called the "Father of Shaker Music," composed more hymns, anthems, and exercise songs than any other Shaker of his day. Shaker music was certainly unconventional, by the world's standards, and theoreticians such as Isaac Youngs and Russell Haskell formulated what they hoped would be a less confusing and more fitting system of musical notation in the 1840s. In his new Shaker musical notation, letters were used in place of round notes, and a greater degree of rhythmic freedom expressive of spiritual spontaneity was permitted. Joy, yearning, and other involuntary emotions had no place in the utilitarian, regimented Shaker's day. "But in the songs and operations (exercised dances) of worship the urge to play, to love, to create, found release in ways which revealed the very soul of the individual and the essential ethos of the sect." (Andrews, The Gift to be Simple, p.8).

From the incipency of the Shaker movement, dancing, or "laboring" under operations of the spirit was an essential element of Shaker worship. The Shakers found several reasons to add dance to their worship. They found 19 scripture passages that said they should dance for the Lord and also reasoned that God created the whole body not just the mouth and hands and therefore they should praise the Lord with their whole bodies. The communal family often gathered in their family meeting room to worship during the weekday evenings, at first in spontaneous, individual dancing, and later to practice intricate dance steps. "The earliest function of 'labouring'—as the Shakers termed such exercises— was to shake off 'doubts' and mortify the lusts of the flesh." (Andrews, The Gift to be Simple p.144)

Early in the Shaker movement and during later eras of spiritual revival, the dancing was in the primitive, or "back" manner. Each person manifesting spiritual influence exercised in whatever way he was moved by such a full spirit. Individuals "under operations" carried out a variety of expressive movements, most of which were humbling; Shakers sought to diminish self-pride, seeking ever after simplicity. High-spirited, frenzied exercises took many forms.

When Father Joseph Meacham undertook the organization of the Shaker society, he felt that the dance as an element of worship also needed to be better organized, and in the 1780s he instituted the first formal dance movement, the "holy order step and shuffle," also known

as the "square order step and shuffle." This "first distinct dance movement was said to have been learned by Father Joseph.. in a vision of angels dancing before the throne of God." (Andrews, The Gift to be Simple p.147). No graceful, dancing angel himself Father Joseph practiced this square order step and shuffle while locked alone in a room until he felt adept enough to teach the dance to others. In the late 1780s, this was the only formal dance, but in the first quarter of the 19th century, more types of uniform gestures and dances were introduced. Mother Lucy Wright, successor to Father Joseph Meacham, introduced the practice of motioning with the hands while singing exercise songs in 1815. In 1817, the first simple marches, performed to step-songs, were incorporated into the worship, and the first real "ring" dances were developed in 1822.

The western Shakers were particularly influenced in their music and dancing by the elements of the Kentucky Revival, and many Pleasant Hill Shakers themselves felt inspired to write hymns, anthems, and exercise songs. Long hours of dance and singing practice were passed in this family meeting room.

Elder Giles B. Avery (of the central ministry at New Lebanon) while on a trip to the western societies in 1862, confided in his journal that there had never seen a society meeting conducted with more propriety than the one he had just witnessed at Pleasant Hill. 'There were no awkward arrangements, or tardiness of movement in the general direction of exercises, but a promptitude of movement (that was) very admirable.' Another eastern elder wrote, 'The singing here is very strong and beautiful, & the exercise in meeting as strong as a mighty host of Angels, or an Army in battle against their enemies—no holding back among the young people.' (Ham thesis, p.158)

We have had a brief discussion of the dancing and singing aspects of Shaker worship. Andrews has observed: "Whereas the hymns and anthems voiced the doctrines of the sect, the exercise songs expressed its inner spirit." (Andrews, The Gift to be Simple, p.21).

In addition to the various sorts of meetings and practice sessions mentioned above, the family meeting room served one other important purpose: sometimes Sabbath meetings would be held separately by each family in their own meeting room, instead of the village meeting house, under given circumstances such as: during civil disruptions and epidemics; when the weather was especially inclement; or, in later years, as the spirit generally waned.

Shaker Sabbath worship was unique, and yet in the early days followed the form dictated by spiritual influence on each individual and was therefore purely natural. Shakers shared their devotional feelings in worship as they shared every other aspect of their communal lives. Full participation in worship meant worshipping with one's whole body and soul, expressed through dancing, singing, and other "exercises," rather than merely repeating time-worn phrases.

The public was often invited to attend sabbath meetings, and in the hope of winning converts, a Shaker elder or public minister might preach an address especially for visitors. This method was, however, not particularly successful in gaining converts to the Shaker cause. In public meetings, the degree of spiritual inspiration seemed not to be so great as in private family meetings, and during the periods of Shaker spiritual revival, sabbath meetings were usually closed to the public. Eyewitness accounts indicate that most visitors, although respectful, attended Shaker meetings as they would to enjoy theatrical entertainment rather



than to receive religious edification. Many visitors, however, found the worship terrifying.

Although the character of the Shaker worship service changed over the years, certain elements remained constant: brethren and sisters would file in silently to their respective sides of the meeting house and sit in meditative, preparatory silence for awhile. No one who had unconfessed sins could attend the meeting; all were expected to be present and “in union.” Absences were regarded as tending to disorder.

The Shaker service did not include any public prayer aloud, and there were no formal creeds to be repeated in unison; each person prayed silently. The service would begin with one or two hymns. There was very little sermonizing, but, depending on the particular occasion, one or two of the family elders might give short talks, which were followed by a few more hymns, sometimes scriptures were read from the King James version of the Bible and even at times a letter from another village would be shared with the group. Then, the presiding elder would indicate that it was time “to go forth and worship God in the dance.” The benches were moved back, brethren removed their coats, and the singers and dancers assumed their positions for the dance.

The dancing might start out in a slow tempo, with, say, a slow march as they “warmed up” and then proceed to faster ring dances. During the dancing, the elders and eldresses of the ministry would watch through their small windows high up in the walls on either side of the room to judge the degree of “spirit” manifested in the dance. Dance songs were frequently very long, and often followed one right after another, giving the dancers no rest break between dances. While the dancing was going on, the singers would also be keeping time to the tune with hand motions. After the dancing, there might be one or two brief addresses, and then a final hymn to close the service.

Family meetings were often a bit more lively than sabbath meetings open to the public, and the elders at family meetings would be more likely to relate inspiring testimonies to the worshippers. Whether or not the meeting was open to the public, the main part of the service was comprised of dancing and singing.

From the time of its very beginnings in England, the Shaker religion was based more on direct inspiration than on any formal system of beliefs. The beliefs, practices, and instructions of Mother Ann Lee were based on her visions and spiritual experiences as well as on the practical necessities faced by the struggling young sect. “The relatively simple elements of Ann’s mystic faith were developed by Joseph Meacham into a more consistent and elaborate belief. His was the doctrine of the four ‘dispensations’, those periods in the history of man (from Adam to Abraham to Moses to Jesus to Ann) during which God had gradually unfolded His plan of salvation.” (Andrews, The Gift to be Simple p.5). Two early Shaker converts in America, Talmadge Bishop and Reuben Wright, travelling to Mother Ann’s first community at Niskeyuna, learned her astonishing doctrine of resurrection: “The resurrection, they were told, was not a day of reckoning coming with catastrophic suddenness to all mankind. When any man confessed his sins, then he was personally saved and resurrected; when he entered into the life of the spirit, then for him the ‘world’ was at an end.” (Andrews, The People Called Shakers p.18).

Mother Ann Lee was indeed a charismatic leader. Andrews identifies the concept “central in Shaker thought, that the spirit of Christ had so suffused her being that she regarded herself as His special instrument.” (Andrews, The People Called Shakers, p.11). This special

relationship which Mother Ann and her followers believed she had with Christ was witnessed by one Jonathan Slosson who saw Mother Ann at Mount Washington. After "operations," Mother Ann said: "I converse with Christ; I feel Him present with me, as sensibly as I feel my hands together. My soul is married to him in the spirit;—he is my husband; it is not I that speaks; it is Christ who dwells in me." (Testimonies of...Mother Ann Lee p.162).

In A Summary View of the Millennial Church (1823), the doctrines of the manifestation of the Christ spirit in Mother Ann, 'spiritual regeneration' and 'the new birth' were further clarified. The seven principles of the church of Christ, according to the authors of this work, were duty to God, duty to man, separation from the world, practical peace, simplicity of language, right use of property, and the virgin life. They formed the practical and external law of a life based on the twelve Christian virtues of faith, hope, honesty, continence, innocence, simplicity, meekness, humility, prudence, patience, thankfulness, and charity.

(Andrews, The Gift to be Simple, p.6).

1842 was often called the most remarkable year in terms of religious practices in Shaker history. Midway in the decade of spiritualism known as "Mother Ann's Work," 1842 was the society-wide closing of public meetings (meetings had been closed at Pleasant Hill in July of the previous year), and the beginning of the so-called "mountain meetings."

The highly emotional Shaker revival period known as Mother Ann's Work began in the Niskeyuna (Watervliet), New York, Shaker community in 1837. It gradually spread to the other Shaker societies and was hailed as a great increase of spirit. On 17 September, 1838, Mother Ann's Work reached Pleasant Hill. Sarah Pool was the first of the Mercer County Shakers to experience the sensation of being a disembodied spirit. One consequence of the revival was that the dancing reverted to the individual, "back" manner; the more subdued, orderly dancing was replaced for awhile by inspired, primitive, expressive exercises.

Religious meetings had become almost a daily occurrence by the late 1830s; each family met in its family meeting room almost nightly for spiritual "laboring" after their daily secular labor was over. Far from exhausting them, the evening meetings with their abundance of spiritual "gifts" seemed to refresh the Shakers.

Throughout this period of intense spirituality, Shakers during meeting or even at work in their shops experienced spiritual visitations. Affected brethren or sisters became "instruments" of such revered departed figures as Mother Ann Lee, Father James Whittaker, George Washington, the Marquis de Lafayette, etc., who were passing on commandments or revelations from the spirit world by possessing for awhile the communicating abilities of the Shaker instruments. The spiritual messages increased in number, and their content became so unpredictable that the head Shaker ministry in New Lebanon ordered in 1840 that all spiritual messages be written out and subjected to the ministry's approval before they were given out in meetings. The symbolic drawings which were dictated by the spirit to the instrument along with the message texts were rich in color and design. The quiet, orderly Shaker, subdued in his daily life, allowed his imagination to create enchanting, colorful drawings representing the winged emotions of his excited, religious spirit.

A most unique aspect of this revival period, and certainly the most elaborate of all Shaker rituals, were the spiritual feasts referred to previously as mountain meetings. In the spring of 1842, very explicit orders went out from the central ministry at New Lebanon to all the

societies as to just how they were to proceed:

Each society was to select a mountain top or some secluded place within the village, grade and inclose it, laying a low hexagonal fence around a plot known as the 'fountain,' a holy fount of purifying waters, prepared by the 'eternal Father's own hand, for the use of his... chosen people, to drink, wash and bathe in, and to purify and cleanse their souls, a spiritual fountain not seen by mortal eye.' (Ham thesis, p.171)

Most of the eastern societies located their holy ground on mountaintops, hence the term "meetings."

It took two years before Pleasant Hill's "Holy Sinai's Plain" was located by divine inspiration, on 21 September, 1844. The actual location was long disputed. Two accounts locate the Holy Sinai's Plain differently, one states in the southwest, the other due east of the village meeting house. An entry in the Journal of the Centre Family for Thursday, 26 September, reads: "We had our first meeting at holy Sinai's plain duration 4 hours." This meeting could not have been what we might today call "a total experience," as it took place only five days after the discovery of the proper location, and other journal entries quoted in the Ham thesis describe some necessary preparatory landscaping of "Holy Sinai's Plain:"

The brethren cleared, graded, and planted the sacred spot with bluegrass seed, and in the center laid out the fountain. Later, the whole plain was enclosed with a simple white plank fence, and two fir trees were set out giving a simple and dignified beauty to the holy ground.

The meetings at Holy Sinai's Plain were to be held twice a year, in May and September. Much spiritual preparation was done in advance of the meetings to make the brethren and sisters more susceptible to powerful visionary experiences, and, finally, on the night before the meeting, the brethren and sisters received special, ethereal, yet wholly spiritual garments to wear to the special meeting. On the morning of the meeting, the families assembled at the village Meeting House and marched joyfully to Holy Sinai's Plain. The ritual was long and involved, taking all morning and most of the afternoon, and included such elements as cleansing oneself in the spiritual fountain (represented in actuality by a polished and inscribed "fountain stone") which poured forth various beneficial "waters;" performing various inspired dances and songs; receiving spiritual gifts, showered in profusion on the Believers; and, finally, feasting together on spiritual food served on spiritual, bejeweled dishes.

The era of Mother Ann's Work died down gradually, as it had gained momentum. It is hard to assign an ending date to this revival period, but there are certain telling signs: in January of 1848, Father Joseph Meacham's orderly dance, "the holy order step and shuffle," was reinstated as an element of worship; the dietary restrictions were gradually lifted again. Spiritual "gifts" decreased in frequency, and by the late 1850s rules had relaxed so much that on 26 October, 1857, musicians came from Harrodsburg to serenade the Shaker families in their dwelling houses—the first time a musical instrument had been played in the Shaker houses. (Thomas and Thomas, The Simple Spirit).





**Put your hands to work  
and your hearts to God,  
and benefits will befall thee.**

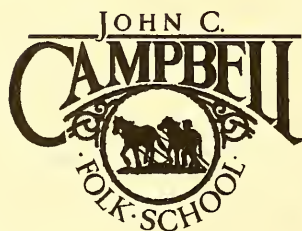
***Mother Ann Lee***

**Do all your work as though  
you've a thousand years to live,  
and as you would if you knew  
you must die tomorrow.**

***Mother Ann Lee***



**North Carolina  
Humanities Council**



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